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ABSTRACT

This document describes the Peer Assistance and Leadership (PAL) Program, a peer helping program developed by the Austin Independent School District in Austin, Texas. It explains how selected high school students are trained to work as peer facilitators with younger students either on their own campus or from feeder junior high or elementary schools. The basic goal of the PAL program is given as helping the younger students to have a more positive and productive school experience and to make more responsible and informed decisions. Activities in which PAL students participate are listed, including outreach programs in the communities which deal with teenage sexuality, suicide, and drug and alcohol abuse. It is noted that PAL students provide younger students with individual and group peer support, discussion sessions, and tutorial assistance. The history of the PAL program since its beginning in 1980 is briefly reviewed, PAL student training is described, and results of evaluations of the PAL program are discussed which attest to its success. The role of the PAL Advisory Committee, a volunteer organization of outstanding former PAL students, is discussed and future uses of PAL as a model program are considered. (NB)

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PROGRAM SUMMARY

PEER ASSISTANCE AND LEADERSHIP (PAL) PROGRAM

April, 1987

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Program Overview

The PAL (Peer Assistance and Leadership) Program is a peer helping program in which selected high school students are trained to work as peer facilitators with younger students either on their own campus, or from feeder junior high or elementary schools. The basic goal of the PAL students is to help the younger students with whom they work to have a more positive and productive school experience, and to make more informed and responsible decisions. In support of this goal, PAL students provide both individual and group peer support, discussion sessions, and tutorial assistance. They also participate in a wide variety of outreach projects in the schools and in the broader community. In the past, these projects have included conducting presentations on such issues as teenage sexuality, suicide, and drug/alcohol abuse; providing welcome and orientation to new students; spearheading campaigns to discourage drunken driving; raising disaster relief funds; and work with disadvantaged and/or handicapped children. Throughout all of these activities, a common theme is that students themselves are one of our most valuable resources in addressing the problems and concerns of young people.

The PAL Program began in September of 1980 as a pilot peer program at one high school and one junior high in the Austin Independent School District (AISD). By the 1985-86 school year, it had grown to the point that program services were being provided at four high schools, five junior highs, and twelve elementary schools. During that year, a total of 104 high school students were selected and trained to work as PALs; they worked with over 750 younger students, and provided over 4,700 hours of peer helping services. During the current (1986-87) project year, the program is being implemented at seven of the ten AISD high schools, and an even greater number of students is involved.

The PAL Program is offered as an elective course within the AISD. At participating high schools, there is a faculty member from the regular staff who serves as sponsor/teacher of the course, and is primarily responsible for the selection, training, supervision, and placement of PAL students. Program sponsors are provided with consultation and assistance in these tasks by staff from the Austin Child Guidance Center, whose involvement in the program is made possible through a grant from the Texas Commission on Alcohol and Drug Abuse. Additional funding support is provided by the AISD, which assists with expenses in such areas as training, transportation, and program-related materials and activities.

Much of the in-class training of PAL students focuses on such areas as self-awareness, group dynamics, communication skills, helping strategies, problem-solving and decision-making, tutoring skills, substance abuse prevention, and knowledge of community resources. Suggested activities and resources in these areas are dealt with extensively in the PAL Sponsors' Manual and PAL Course Description and Curriculum Guide, both of which are available from the AISD. Additional training for PAL students and sponsors is provided by youth-serving professionals, programs, and services from the community. Training workshops for PAL Program participants have been conducted by representatives of such organizations as the Center for Educational Development, Planned Parenthood, the Austin Council on Alcoholism, Charter Lane Hospital, Austin Wilderness Counseling Services, the Center for Conflict Management, the University of Texas' Learning Abilities Center, as well as by

a number of counselors and social workers in private practice. These contacts with professionals in the community enable PAL students to improve their expertise, and also to make appropriate referrals when necessary.

Does the PAL Program Work?

Over the past six years, evaluation data have consistently revealed a very positive response to the program among students and staff at participating schools. During the most recent (1985-86) project year, for example, 90% of the younger students served by the program reported that they had found the program worthwhile. Specific areas in which they had benefitted from their participation included the following: self-concept (79% positive responses); getting along with others (85%); staying out of trouble in school (72%); improving attendance (70%); improving academic performance (88%); dealing with peer pressure (70%); making responsible decisions (79%); avoiding problems with drugs or alcohol (74%); and being more confident about succeeding in school in the future (87%). Among the PAL students themselves, the 1985-86 survey revealed that 100% of the PALs had found the program to be a valuable and worthwhile experience. Specific areas in which the PALs felt they had benefitted included self-concept (94% positive responses); communication skills (97%); decision-making (90%); responsibility (95%); and concern for others (97%). Finally, in a survey of faculty members at schools involved in the program during the 1985-86 project year, 97% reported that their students had benefitted from their participation, and 94% expressed a desire to see the program continued in the future. More specifically, teachers reported that among students who were served by the program, positive changes were seen in the following areas: self-concept (95% positive responses); behavior (90%); academic performance (69%); peer relations (68%); and improved attitude (95%). Similar, and similarly positive, results were likewise obtained for previous years of the program (further information on these evaluation studies is available from the Austin Child Guidance Center).

In addition to positive results from evaluation studies, there are a number of other indications of the program's visibility and effectiveness. In a 1985 study by the Public Health Foundation, the PAL Program was cited as being among the nation's "exemplary and innovative" programs for service delivery to adolescents. Articles about the program have appeared in the April, 1985 and August, 1985 issues of Peer Facilitator Quarterly, a national journal of and about peer helping programs. The program has also been favorably featured in several very positive articles in Austin's daily newspaper. For all of these reasons, the program enjoys a high level of support not only within the school district, but within the broader community as well. In the words of AISD Superintendent Dr. John Ellis, "There is no question that the PAL Program has been remarkably effective."

The PAL Advisory Council: A Key to Continuity

A unique and important aspect of the PAL Program is the PAL Advisory Council (PAC), a volunteer organization of outstanding former PAL students who have maintained their involvement in, and commitment to, the program even after graduation from high school. PAC members contribute to the program in a number of ways: assisting with the orientation and training of high school PAL students; sponsoring workshops, retreats, and other activities for program participants; providing support to program sponsors at participating high schools; and working with high-risk students in special settings such as the junior high summer school and the F.R. Rice School, the District's program for secondary students who have been suspended from their regular campuses. In addition, the PAL Advisory Council—which currently has fifteen active members—plans to conduct a Saturday morning support group at the Child Guidance Center for junior high students from throughout the AISD.

Much as the high school PAL students act as positive role models for the younger students with whom they work, PAC members serve as role models for the high school PALs. Moreover, they exemplify the proposition that young people can continue in constructive and helping roles long past graduation from high school. Further information about the nature, goals, and activities of the PAC can be obtained from the Austin Child Guidance Center.

Looking to the Future: PAL a Model Program?

At this point a framework has been established whereby the PAL Program could become a truly outstanding peer helping program, worthy of replication in other school districts and communities. In 1985, the program was approved by the Texas Education Agency as an experimental elective course for a period of three years. At the conclusion of this period, it will be possible for the program to be approved as a model peer program on a statewide level. In recognition of this potential, the AISD has appointed Dr. Richard Sutch to serve as Instructional Coordinator for PAL throughout the District. In addition to providing direction and support to program sponsors, Dr. Sutch has helped to oversee the development of a PAL Sponsor's Manual, course outline, curriculum guide, and a number of other program-related resources and materials: inquiries about any and all of these resources can be directed to Dr. Sutch c/o AISD, 6100 Guadalupe, Austin, TX 78752, 451-8411 x 348.

Given the long and successful track record of the program, the network that has been established with other programs and services in the community, the collaborative relationship between the AISD and the Austin Child Guidance Center, and the opportunity provided

by the PAL Advisory Council for ongoing involvement of young peer helpers, it is entirely likely that PAL will indeed become a model peer program. Currently the program is in operation or being developed at seven AISD high schools - Crockett, Johnston, LBJ, Austin High, Lanier, Reagan, and W.R. Robbins - with plans being formulated to ensure implementation of the program on a District-wide basis. Concurrent with this implementation will be the goal of making the PAL model available to other schools and school districts which are interested in developing effective peer helping programs.

Those who would like more information about the PAL Program are encouraged to contact the following:

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